NATIONAL PARKS AND ALL THAT: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

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Introduction

The theme of my talk is about the whole question of how we protect the special parts of Scotland because of their ecological, geological, geomorphological, and scenic importance. I will do that in the context of the work which the Government has asked Scottish Natural heritage to do in preparing proposals for National Parks in Scotland, and reviewing the system of landscape protection (National Scenic Areas) in Scotland, bearing in mind that designation of protection areas is, let's face it, a somewhat contentious issue.

What are Protected Areas?

I hope you will forgive me if I start off by addressing the question of what are Protected Areas? This category of protecting special parts of the country. Let us look quickly at the different sorts of Protected Areas in Scotland: the classical Caledonian pine forest ecosystem seen here at Abernethy on Speyside; perhaps a much more important ecosystem internationally - the Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland, important particularly for the bird species which breed there but also, I would argue, important in its own right because of the hydromorphological systems that occur over a very large area. There are important areas for geological interpretation, for instance on the island of Rum owned by SNH, which have been formative as the laboratory for working out the volcanic history of the opening of the Atlantic. Or other areas like the Bass Rock at the mouth of the Firth of Forth which is one of the larger gannet colonies; although it's in private hands and is a highly protected location people can visit it. Or to some of the major landscape features here in North Uist, a rather unique landscape in Scottish and indeed British terms where the rise of sea level has the look of a drowned landscape. Or the more archetypal landscape, as at Scots View down in the Scottish Borders, looking into the volcanic mass of the Eildon Hills.

So, in Scotland we have a variety of Protected Areas in terms of landscape and scenery, and a variety in terms of ecology, geology and geomorphology. All of the areas I have illustrated, and many others, are protected in one way or another by statute. The map illustrates the different types of Protected Areas which we have in Scotland. The vast majority are the Sites of Special Scientific Interest, predominantly to protect species and habitats. But there is a wide variety of other types. If you add them all together they cover about 18% of the land surface. Very little of the marine area is at the moment protected, although there are new approaches to looking at it.

The diversity and types of Protected Areas is, to say the least, mind boggling. The list is long, some of them are statutory and some non-statutory. It's pretty obvious that, when you see lists like this, there is no system as such, there is no coherence, and no rationale in the totality. It is therefore pretty difficult to convince politicians, nationally and locally, of the validity of what we have, particularly when in certain locations in Scotland you may have anything up to ten of these labels applying to one site.

One can try to be a little more systematic in one's explanation, by looking at protection at the international level through Conventions which have been signed by the Government, European level through Directives, the national level through Westminster legislation, and also the regional level and the local level, which is much more informal. Relating these types to the different categories of wildlife, earth heritage, scenery, etc begins to make a little more sense, but is still pretty much of a mish-mash. Unlike many other countries whose protection of nature and landscape has been much more recent than the United Kingdom, we do not have any systematic overview and I cannot see the current Government coming forward with this approach at all.

The fragmentation of the system is perhaps best epitomised if I look very briefly at how one selects these special areas. Let's take first "The Criteria for the Selection of Biological Sites of Special Scientific Interest". There are 1400 of these sites in Scotland. The biologists amongst us will tell me, unconvincingly I have to say, that

this is a very objective process. One looks at factors such as naturalness, extent on the ground, the degree of rarity, the degree of diversity. But if one looks very carefully at how these are applied, then it is obvious that there is a great degree of subjective judgement. This is exacerbated by the spatial units on which these sites are chosen. They are administrative units: the local authority boundaries from 1943. To me, it defies any logical explanation as to the relevance of these administrative boundaries to the distribution of species in the country; and the same applies in England and Wales as well. I conclude that we have biological sites based on a highly subjective system with a spatial basis which is, frankly, highly questionable.

If we take one other example, and look at the criteria for selecting National Scenic Areas. Inevitably this is extremely subjective. How you define "beautiful" defies most people. Also if you look at the detail of the selection definition, it is very skewed to richly diverse landscapes and areas which are most prized. If you look at the distribution of these 40 National Scenic Areas, you will find that it is very skewed towards the upland and island parts of Scotland, with very poor representation of lowland areas. It is interesting therefore that the brief which we have from Lord Sewel to look at National Scenic Areas, makes particular reference to considering whether there can be better representation of coastal areas and lowland areas, and to reach the single but important conclusion that we do not have a Protected Areas system as such.

But let's stop for a moment and reflect as to why we need Protected Areas in the first place. I think probably the best argument is that over a long period of time, really since the Loch Lomond Stadial we have experienced loss of species. If, for example, we consider the extinction of mammals in Scotland, you might argue that some of them are the result of climatic change but I consider that anything from loss of the lynx onwards is nothing to do with climatic changes, but is to do with human intervention. A similar situation pertains for other species such as birds.

Another way of looking at the situation is by looking at the net changes in land cover in Scotland over the post-war period. The point to note particularly from the diagram is the fact that two key habitats in Scotland (key in terms of their ecological

importance and their contribution to landscape quality): blanket mire and heather moorland have diminished very considerably. The basic reasons for this are the development of plantation forestry, to a lesser extent overgrazing, which has resulted, for instance, in heather moorland being converted into rough grassland, and drainage resulting in blanket mire being converted into heather moorland.

These very considerable changes in our land cover suggest that the overall quality of species, habitats and landscapes is itself diminishing. To me, that seems to suggest that we do need to have Governmental policy which protects the Special Areas.

If we look at the other part of the "why do we need them?" question and refer to the map of the Sites of Special Scientific Interest, there are vastly different scales from the huge expanses in the Cairngorms and in the Flow Country, for instance, to the rather small scale ones in lowland agricultural Scotland. There are a number of basic reasons for these SSSIs, first to preserve and protect areas which are very special for their species and habitats. Second, to ensure the restoration of these areas where they have been degraded, especially through drainage or through overgrazing. Also, and I think this is relevant in an academic context, to make them available for study. The gathering of scientific knowledge on these areas is still a vital component. And finally, so that they are available for informal recreation and quiet enjoyment, ie where this is compatible with the protection. They are an asset for use by people.

What is wrong with the present system?

If these are the reasons for Protected Areas what is wrong with the present set up? Let's reflect on that a little. The first thing that is wrong is that we don't have a system at all. Let us, for example, refer to the map of Protected Areas in the West Highlands and the Inner Hebrides. The island of Rum, for instance, is designated as a National Scenic Area, a National Nature Reserve, a Special Protection Area under the Birds Directive and a Special Area of Conservation under the Habitats Directive. The rationale for each of these designations is legitimate within the narrow context of each approach but there is no coherence whatsoever. Take also for example, Locheil, which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest within a National Scenic Area,

but the management plans for those two different units have not been brought together into a coherent whole.

What is also noticeable, and I am slightly cheating here by using a photograph from another part of the world, this is the Olympic Peninsula, just west of Seattle in the north-west Pacific of the USA, that Protected Areas can work, but outside the boundary "all hell let's loose". There the boundary of the Olympic National Park is shown by the edge of the virgin forest and outside that the ground has been completely cut over, so there is a distinct boundary effect. In other words there is no point in having a Protected Area, if what happens outside can actually have a damaging impact on maintaining the qualities of that area.

There is also, in a Scottish context, a very high application of resources to these protected parts of the country at the expense of the rest. That is best shown through the way in which SNH's budget is divided. The landward area of nature conservation sites is 11% of the total but we spend 40% of our overall budget on this area. To be perfectly frank, that concerns me a great deal, because it means, quite obviously, that we spend much less of our effort on the rest of the country where most of the people live. So it becomes a nature-centred approach as opposed to a balance between a nature and people-centred approach.

Also there are great debates amongst geomorphologists, biologists and the like on the management objectives of these areas. Take, for example, the Tentsmuir sand dune complex on the south side of the Tay. Do we let nature take its course, as I would say, and allow the scrub vegetation to cover the dune complex, or do we spend a lot of money bringing in grazing animals? We have taken the latter course and have recently replaced goats with cattle. What are we trying to achieve there? Should we be trying to arrest the succession or should we be letting it drive forward and see what happens? Similarly, this amazingly mowed lawn on the Mar Lodge Estate in Glen Lui, what are we trying to achieve there where there is clearly a conflict between sporting estate management, and the regeneration of the Caledonian pine ecosystem and the removal of plantation forestry, which should not have been there in the first place. Or, in the marine areas, given the importance of sea birds around the Scottish coast, how can we have a protection policy for where

they nest and breed if we do not connect that to the marine areas where they get their food? In the case of the puffins, of course, I refer to the sandeels off the Shetland coast and off the Wee Bankie off Fife. So these are very important questions which we need to address.

The other thing which is an inheritance from the previous Government and, particularly an inheritance from the big traditional landowners who are powerful in the House of Lords, who have tended to sabotage any environmentally based legislation, is the approach, depicted in the cartoon: "One hundred and fifty thousand in small denominational notes or I chop down all the trees and build a theme park. Yours, the Earl of Strathmaver." Some of you may remember that we had a great rumpus 18 months or so ago because we dared to give money to the Sutherland family, apparently to safeguard a few plants. We said "well, sorry, that's the way the system drives us; it's good value for money, it's £130,000 for a hundred years to protect these important plants." But it was in an area in where commercial timber had been deliberately planted, way back in the 1920s. That is the sort of dilemma which we face. What is called the voluntary principle to conservation is voluntary on the owners of the land who say this is what they want to do, but it is involuntary on the taxpayer through SNH, because we have to cough up if we feel that the biological value of these areas has to be safeguarded and maintained.

Then, of course, there is the wider view which spins from that: "man is the endangered species" and, as the cartoon shows SNH appears gagged, as a result of which we get headlines in the papers to the effect that: 'people should come first', 'Chief Constable is driven from his home by a plague of bats', etc, etc. That sort of bad publicity is bad for SNH but, it hinders the achievement of a solution between environmental, and social and economic concerns.

What should be the new approach?

So, then, where do we go from here? What should be the basis of the new approach? What I want to do is very briefly indicate some thinking which I have been involved in on the European scene, it reflects some working which we did over the last few days, so it is in that sense 'hot off the press'. What we are trying to do is

basically change the whole basis of protected area philosophy from, if you like, a subjective science-based approach to an approach which is environmentally sensitive but also recognises broader issues. In the new 'Action Plan for Protected Areas in Europe' we want, over the next five years, to mobilise support for 'A network of Protected Areas; which are well managed to safeguard the natural heritage (the use of that word is deliberate because it embraces landscape, species, habitats, geomorphology and geological interests) and to contribute to the wider agenda of the economic, social and cultural well-being of the people of Europe'. Now you may think that that's fairly ordinary wording. I can assure you that it is quite a breakthrough. I now wish to look at how we have cascaded that thinking downwards. From the overall statement we have identified three strategic objectives. One relates to the adequate network but we want to make sure that that is adequate in coverage, and the important thing here (and I'll come back to this in a moment in a Scottish context) is that there should be strategic approaches to achieve functioning networks, something we don't have at the moment. The second strategic objective is to ensure that we have policies at all levels (local, sub-national, national and international) which support these areas; in other words those that apply to these areas and those that apply to the wider countryside but can have an impact. Obviously, we have in mind, in particular, the Common Agricultural Policy and other agricultural instruments and I will come back to that in a moment as well. And, third, that we need to meet the wider objectives so that Protected Areas are well managed to meet environmental, social, economic and cultural objectives and, in particular, therefore, I would point out that it is essential that local people and other stakeholders, including local authorities, are involved. But not involved in any old way, but involved in shaping the management, participating in the management as appropriate and in recognition that people receive benefit from Protected Areas, then they might actively support their objectives. So overall the objective is to achieve a sea change in mentality, if you like, compared with the sort of newspaper headlines which I showed you a few minutes ago.

So, the way I see our agenda in Scotland is sevenfold and I want to dwell on each point in turn. You will recognise these from my critique of the present set-up but I have turned it round and put a positive spin on them.: the link between Protected Areas and the wider countryside, we must include maritime we should seek wise

stewardship, recognise the different tenure types, obtain stakeholder engagement both in identifying sites and in their management; and finally sorting out the relevant policies and the finance.

Let us start with a new strategic framework. What we have found in our work is that we have to have a rational spatial basis for looking at Protected Areas. If you recall the map of administrative areas I said at the time that it is not a relevant basis. So we have developed a new analysis approach. We overtook species data and then moderated it with climatic, topographic and soil data, with the help of MLURs, to come up with a biogeographic model of Scotland. Translating this schematic model into something which is relevant on the ground has resulted in defining 20 Natural Heritage Zones which seem to reflect the distribution of species, habitats, landforms and landscape features. This is now the basis of the development of our work in SNH and we will be seeking to place our work on Protected Areas, whatever their particular category, within these spatial units. For example, Zone 11, core mountain area of the eastern Grampians; Zone 12, the intermediate moorland areas; 14, the east coast; 9, Moray Firth and Buchan platform, etc. I hope that you have been taught well enough by your teachers present today to be able to relate to this approach and that it bears a resonance with how geographers see the world. So it is important that we have this new spatial planning basis for looking at the special parts of Scotland within their broader biogeographic context.

It is equally important to look within each zone schematically and determine how what happens in the wider countryside interacts with the management objectives for the Protected Areas, so that we have a much more integrated, coherent and to use a good geographer's word, holistic, approach. We must make sure that if we are going to achieve the environmental as well as the socio-economic and cultural objectives on the ground, then we need to translate this approach into spatial plans locally. The map shows an early attempt for Loch Lomond and Trossachs, which recognises that parts of the area need to be managed with a primary recreation objective and other parts of the area for landscape and nature conservation purposes. Not a very sophisticated approach yet but we recognise the need to work on this sort of zonation approach a great deal more.

It's also pretty clear that most of our Protected Areas stop at the high water mark and yet the work which we have been doing using underwater video cameras and still cameras with divers, shows that we have an incredibly diverse marine environment. I am clear, therefore, that in developing new proposals for National Parks and Scenic Areas, we must take into account the marine environment, we mustn't stop at the high water mark or the low water mark. And it is my aspiration, shall I put it like that, personally, that we will at some stage have a National Park in Scotland which embraces everything from the sea floor right to the high tops of the mountains.

Another thing which we need to ensure is that we achieve the appropriate balance between the different interests within Protected Areas, particularly the demands for better recreation activity in tune with the need to conserve special areas. Other countries such as Canada (reference to Kejiankujik National Park, Nova Scotia) where the special protection areas and the wilderness recreation areas are separate from the natural environmental areas and general outdoor recreation areas. This zoning approach is delivered through a plan which seeks to reconcile through different management objectives in different parts of the area the need for strict protection on the one hand, right through to active public enjoyment at the other end. Another example is the Skomer Marine Nature Reserve off the Pembrokeshire Coast, where CCW looked at the different sorts of recreational activities, including swimming, non-power boating, power boating and each can be accommodated through a zoning plan which allows activities but in a manner which is compatible with the natural assets of the area. It is these types of approaches which we shall be developing further.

To me, however, perhaps the most important thing that we need to achieve is, a change in the philosophy on the way that land is owned. At the moment the Government is consulting, as I am sure you know, on land reform and John Bryden here, of course, is the Government's Special Advisor to the Minister and to the Land Reform Policy Group. What we wish to promote is not a shift in who owns the land, we regard that as a second order question. Whether it is owned by a Scot or a Dutchman or a Dane, whether it is owned by a traditional landowner or a crofter or a community or a Government Body, is less important than the basis on which the land is owned. So the concept which we would call 'wise stewardship' is one that we

would like to see the Government adopt, so that anybody who owns a piece of land, whether it's a special place, whether it will become a National Park, whether it is an SSSI, or whether it's not designated at all, would have obligations to manage that natural asset, particularly the soil, water, wildlife and landscape resources, in a way which secured their future longevity and future well-being is the sustainability ethic attached to the land. The wise stewardship approach should, I think, also be applied to third parties, to the people from the towns and cities who wish to use those areas, and to the local communities. That is a different way of thinking. The best way of delivering this is ultimately to enshrine the approach in legislation and that is what we will be exploring with Government in our response to the Land Policy Review Group. More informal voluntary approaches such as Codes of Practice for environmentally sensitive farming are not working particularly, because what farmers do is not driven by environmental policy, butt is actually driven by the Common Agricultural Policy which is still orientated towards producing food (a point I will return to later).

I have already mentioned different tenure types. There are the crofters in Assynt, of course, who are the leading lights in what local communities would like to try and can do if they gain ownership of the land. That is one approach but I don't think it could apply everywhere. There is nothing wrong with the tenure mix as I think can be demonstrated in parts of upper Deeside with, for example, the National Trust for Scotland owning Mar Lodge and the Bruce family, owning the Glenana Estate, seeking to protect not just the environmental assets but to improve their quality and allow access. This shows in microcosm, that it is not so much who owns the land but their own aspirations towards it. So there is no one radical solution such as nationalisation of land, for instance, or give it to the community.

In developing proposals for Protected Areas and in this case, particularly for National Parks, our attitude is that it is less the mechanism that is important than the process of engaging everybody who has an interest, and ought to have an interest, in thinking about the ideas and trying to come up with, commonly shared solutions. The ideal would be that when the Scottish Parliament eventually gets round to promoting a National Parks for Scotland Act, maybe in 2002 or something like that, at least we have got a consensus. That way we will hopefully avoid the polarity which we have had in the past whereby the unhoiy alliance of local communities and

large landowners say ‘not likely, we’re not having these sorts of things’ and the environmental lobby saying ‘we must have them because virtually almost every other country in the globe has them.” So we are actively engaged in seeking comments and contributions and will have a formal consultation paper later this year, which will seek to tease out what the proposals should be and how we might advise Government early next year.

So active engagement of all the communities of interest, as I would call them, is quite critical in the development of ideas. But equally important, once a National Park or another type of Protected Area has been defined or designated, is involving these communities of interest in how it should be managed, irrespective of whether they have a title to the land or not. So, exercises which Magnus Magnusson and I started off, like the Cairngorms Working Party, are very important, involving a mixture of community interests, land-owning interests, environmental interests together, to hammer out what the strategy should be, how it is to be delivered and what each of the interest group’s role is in that delivery.

If we can move forward on all of those aspects which I have just stated, that is not sufficient unless we sought out other Government policies and the way which finance from other parts of the Government operates, we will fail anyway. The central point at the top of many people’s agenda is how to shift the support to agriculture under the Common Agriculture Policy of the EU and the agri-environment programme of the British Government so both of them have a much broader basis than purely food production. There are key objectives that should be environmental; there are key objectives that should also be social, retaining people actively working in rural Scotland. The figures in the diagram are very clear: of £830 million a year spent in Scotland on support directly related to the natural heritage, our budget and that of the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, is only 7% together. The agricultural budgets through arable aid support, through the various livestock support measures, through the advisory services which are often free, through other structural measures and agri-environment - are seventy odd per cent of the total. And given that the objectives of these resources are very narrowly focused at the moment, it is therefore clear that there needs to be a change of emphasis in order to protect the

high quality parts of Scotland's environment in a way that they are available for future generations, but also make sure that they do benefit people in our generation.

So, that is very broadly what we would like to see and obviously the philosophy and the key points which I am making here will very much influence our advice to Government on the development of National Parks. They reflect thinking not just in Scotland but they reflect thinking in Europe and internationally, but do require a very significant change of approach within the political process. I will be very happy to answer any questions and enter into a debate.

Thank you very much.

Roger Crofts